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ABSTRACT

Blalock FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching) is a 3-year, federally funded intervention program designed to increase school attendance, student achievement and self-esteem, and parent and community involvement in school activities among low-income housing project residents. As a way of easing strained parent-school relations, a Parent Center was established in the program's pilot year. Over the school year, 61% of the school's families used the center, which is a spacious area within the adjacent elementary school with living and dining room furnishings. The center serves as a vehicle to facilitate parents' involvement in their children's education as well as communication and trust among parents, project staff, and school personnel. Parents share their concerns and offer suggestions on improving the program. One activity initiated by the parents involved a dance class and a weekly practice session staffed by parent volunteers. The job of acting as assistant dance instructors provided parents with experience in planning, public speaking, coordinating events, keeping records, and otherwise participating in an activity in which they were personally invested. In follow-up interviews, parents expressed their satisfaction, their sense of accomplishment, and constructive ideas on similar undertakings. During the year, parents completed several projects and saw themselves as successful change agents. Several parents have taken on increased responsibility within the school. (AC)

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Utilizing the Parent Center Concept as a Means to Improve the Relations Between Parent and Child/School and Community

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Determining the best approach and type of curriculum to offer diverse populations of adult learners who participate in literacy programs can be challenging (Goudeau, 1986; Parker, 1989; Nurss and Rawlston, 1991). Of equal concern, is how to simultaneously create programs in which the adult learners feel that they can acquire skills that will help them: (1) assist their children with their school work (Jackson and Cooper, 1989; Parker, 1989); (2) build sufficient self esteem to pursue their individual learning goals (Nickse 1988; Nardine 1990); and (3) "be of relevance, interest, and possibly lead to unforseen insights and study projects initiated by students" (Goudeau, 1986, p. 20).

Blalock FIRST (Fund for the Improvement and Reform of Schools and Teaching) is a three-year, federally-funded project that serves families who are predominately female heads of households on government subsidized incomes living in inner-city housing. The project is based in an elementary school which serves only families living in the adjacent public housing project. The overall goals of Blalock FIRST are to: increase school attendance and achievement in reading and mathematics of students in Kindergarten through Grade 7; implement a Class Improvement Support System Project in classrooms; reduce the number of students who are retained or placed in remedial programs (Chapter I & REP); improve students' self-esteem;

increase teachers' expectations for students' achievement; increase involvement and cooperation of students' families; and increase community support for and involvement in school activities.

Initial interviews with parents during the pilot year revealed that some parents were hesitant to visit the school. These findings are consistent with the work of Comer (1988); Jackson and Cooper (1989); and Nardine (1990). Many of the parents who attended the literacy class had had limited interaction with the school system, and several of these contacts had been negative resulting in parents feeling alienated and powerless. Relationships between the community and the professional staff of the school were strained in part because a viable, traditional PTA was not in existence. A good number of the parents lacked sufficient experience in group interpersonal relations to preside over functions usually spearheaded by PTA-type organizations. Adding to this strained situation was the perception of teachers, parents, students and community service providers that efforts made by each group went unnoticed and unappreciated.

To address this issue, Blalock FIRST established an inviting environment within the school known as the "Parent Center", a concept that has been reported as having successful results (VanDevender, 1988; Jackson and Cooper, 1989; Nickse, 1990). The Center is an attractive, spacious area with living room and dining room furnishings donated by a local furniture company and

is available to parents Monday through Friday during the normal hours of operation of the school. The initial purpose of the Center was for the parents to make instructional games to be used by their children at home and at school.

Several methods were used to promote the Parent Center including: announcements made by project staff at both the faculty and parent meetings; inserts publicizing the Center in school-wide communiques with references to the available services; project staff canvassing teachers to determine what games they would like most to see produced; and project staff providing demonstrations during the weekly literacy classes on how to construct the games. An average of four parents per day visited the Center from one to five hours per day. A total of 89 parents (61%) of the school's families used the Center over the school year. Parents initially visited the Center to make instructional games for themselves and teachers. Thirty-four matching games that included letter and number recognition and basic sight words were produced by parents during the first month of the Center's operation. For many of the parents, this experience was a first time that they had been able to contribute to the school, a feeling that has been expressed by other adult learners (Parker, 1989). As parents grew comfortable and internalized that their presence was welcomed, the Center additionally began to serve as a vehicle to facilitate communication and establish trust among the participants, the project staff, and the school staff.

The nonthreatening atmosphere of the Parent Center had the reciprocal effect of contributing to another "first" for some members of the administration, teachers, and parents. Communication that was nonadversarial began to take place between parents and visitors. Conversations ranged from instructions on floral arrangement to tips on sewing, bargain shopping, and parenting. Through workshops and socials attended by both parents and school staff, parents were able to express and demonstrate interest in their children that some professionals had never witnessed.

By encouraging participants to engage in open discussion, parents made progress in being able to share their concerns and offer well thought-out, concrete suggestions on how to improve the recreational program for their female children. This achievement occurred, however, after many opportunities for parents to practice being good listeners, sharing views, and sorting out the facts of an issue without taking things personally. Project staff used strategies of disclosure, accessibility and attending to parents both physically and emotionally, and reframing past and present possibilities to contribute to group participation. Modeling the desired verbal behaviors that project staff wanted parents to demonstrate when they communicated with one another (France and Meeks, 1989; Nickse, 1988) proved helpful in aiding parents to stay on topic, plan, and come to conclusions that could lead to a course of action.

Out of one such conversation, parents identified their concern that more opportunities needed to be made available in the community to keep their daughters occupied in constructive endeavors. Their disclosure resulted in a dance program for girls ages 6 through 14 years, sponsored by project staff and planned primarily by parent volunteers. It is felt that valuing parental opinion and soliciting their help as problem solvers (Brown and Hawkins, 1988; Comer, 1988; Nardine, 1990; Nickse, 1990) served as a catalyst to motivate three of these parents to take on the responsibility of assisting with the formation of a dance group.

Blalock FIRST personnel provided the basic information needed for setting up the program but primarily served as motivators and enablers. The parent volunteers took the initiative, and in coordination with the director of the nearby community center, established a time for the Saturday classes to meet. These parents communicated that they were committed and volunteered two hours per week of their time to hold an extra weekly practice session. Parents decided what day during the week they would hold practice with the girls and secured permission from the school's principal for use of the school after hours.

Although there was some initial reluctance to express themselves in writing, these parent volunteers contributed to the draft of the letter and permission slip that was sent home to interested girls and alphabetized lists of the final

participating girls for purposes of attendance. The thought of having to conduct the first and subsequent meetings with the dancers created considerable anxiety among the mothers but, with encouragement, they were able to summarize their personal expectations for the participants' conduct, explain the format of the rehearsals and describe the required dance attire. Other responsibilities taken on by the parents included: conducting all rehearsals; reviewing the vocabulary of dance terms weekly by having the girls define and demonstrate the steps; keeping up with the attendance; communicating progress to all involved parents; administering and collecting a set of questionnaires that documented the dancers' feelings about being involved in the program; and being prepared to select students who displayed the most improvement, best attitude, and sense of creativity based on criteria that they as a group established.

The positive effects of parents taking on leadership roles and demonstrating interest in the activities of their children is noted by Nevi (1983):

> Tutoring enhances self-esteem, it makes the tutor feel in control of the learning, and it provides much need practice of lower skills; it helps the tutor gain a deeper understanding of what s/he is teaching, and the materials used may be at a level appropriate to the tutor's skill (p. 896).

Accepting the positions of assistant dance instructors provided these parent with an activity in which they were personally invested. Further, this experience gave them additional experience in planning, speaking before a group, following directions, coordinating events, keeping records, interacting

appropriately with their peers, communicating and cooperating with a variety of authority figures, making decisions, realizing the need for punctuality and evaluating their own performance as well as the performance of others.

In follow up interviews conducted with the parents who participated with the dancers either as instructors or sideline supporters, there were expressions of overall satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and constructive observations on how a similar undertaking could be improved upon. This experience proved to be enough of a boost to the confidence of these parents in their leadership abilities and literacy skills that they were receptive to hosting an Appreciation Tea designed to acknowledge the girls who had participated in the dance group and also to say thank you to the numerous women in the school system and community who provided supportive and direct services throughout the year. This activity sought not only to provide an occasion for fellowship but also to provide another opportunity for parents to make further practical application of their literacy skills. The lessons learned form the experiences with the dance group enabled the parents to tackle the Appreciation Tea's particulars with greater efficiency and more independence. Parents self-initiated divisions of labor attending to the smallest details including: securing a facility, planning the menu, purchasing food, planning the program, and promoting the affair. Of special note was a collaborative original essay written by the parents entitled "Thoughts on Mothering", a

reflection on the special challenges of being a mother in a difficult era.

The above, admittedly, is but a first step by these adult learners to become more involved in the school and community. This one example serves as a springboard for implementing on a wider scale greater commitment to the family; broadening the definition of parent involvement; and using a variety of involvement strategies (Jackson and Cooper, 1989).

"Parent Centers" housed in the school as demonstrated can be used as a vehicle to: serve as site for ongoing projects that are both school and community related; provide a source of support for parents; act additionally as a neutral environment for students, parents, and school staff to dialogue and interact around points of common interest; and facilitate the dismantling of long-standing negative perceptions held by all parties.

During the course of the year parents participating in the "Parent Center" were able to follow several projects to completion and to see themselves as successful change agents, not only in their own lives but with reference to their interactions with their children and the professionals in the school. The potential for a host of creative instructional and vocational possibilities and long-term benefits emerges as parents become more visible and active in the school. For example, several of the parents over the course of the year with support have taken on more responsibility. The results include: four of these parents have been elected PTA officers, two of these parents have

obtain employment as aides in the school, three have performed in an original community play that has been video-taped for a local educational channel, one started her own after-school club, another began her own business, and two others will submit their original writings to a local magazine for publication.

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